

After the Rehearsal: “Academic Freedom?” at the MLA and Beyond

One might term Horowitz a blithe bounder,
Liars less elegant but much sounder,
Giving D.H. the finger
Or a verbal zinger
Is not an Em'ly Post dumbfounder!

-- Larry Eisenberg

<http://ideas.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/01/09/academic-culture-wars-09>

MLA members attending “Academic Freedom?”—the roundtable at the San Francisco convention that was sponsored by the Delegate Assembly Organizing Committee—were handed protest leaflets by members of the Radical Caucus as they entered the Hilton Continental 4 early in the morning of 29 December 2008. Strongly opposing the decision by the DAOC to have included David Horowitz as a speaker, the RC deemed the invitation extended to Horowitz to participate as misguided, a matter of professional concern:

At a time when the “adjunctification” of our profession is making more and more teachers fearful of freely expressing their views—and when the perilous state of our society is calling upon more and more of us to be not fainter but bolder in expressing our views—the MLA’s rolling out of the red carpet to one of the premier enemies of academic freedom is a serious error indeed [...] *In these days when academic freedom is under dire threat, the DAOC has chosen to stack the panel in favor of right-wing views.* The DAOC should apologize to us for degrading the level of scholarship and debate that MLA members legitimately expect from any session they attend at the convention (“Re: DAOC’s inviting”)

I had been charged by my colleagues on the DAOC with assembling and presiding over the panel. I had invited Horowitz and the other panelists, Mark Bauerlein, Norma Cantú, and Cary Nelson, to participate in what promised to be a lively session for which no apology seemed necessary. Entities with guaranteed sessions at the annual convention are, after all, “free to choose the participants in the sessions they organize,” as MLA Executive Director Rosemary Feal reminded the members of the Delegate Assembly last fall (“Answers”).

Indeed, controversy is “at the heart of the free academic inquiry” that we humanists purport to foster (“1940 Statement” 5). My right to have invited Horowitz to face his critics was therefore just as valid as was the right of RC members to have objected to the controversial panelist’s participation, or for them to have labeled his past views “troublesome” and “repugnant” (“Re: DOAC’s inviting”). Whether Horowitz actually lived up to the role RC members had cast for him on the lively panel as “a liar of the Goebbels school” remains an open question.

As a longstanding member of the MLA who is committed to the transcendent value of our right as teachers to full freedom in research and in the classroom, I am grateful for the stage and intellectual space that this session provided all who were present both to rehearse and interrogate academic freedom. We fleshed out the definitional questions raised by the session’s title. What is the “free search for truth”? And what is its “free exposition” (“1940 Statement” 3)? In addition, we considered the precarious place of academic freedom in the corporatized academy with its ever-increasing casualized labor force. Moreover, we considered the sources of the various infringements on academic freedom threatening many, if not most, of us. Are they largely from within our own ranks? Or from outside the academy, as some of Horowitz’s critics have suggested? Our discussion was robust and, for the most part, respectful.

It is important that the meaningful professional exchange that took place at the convention not be upstaged by the hypocrisy, “lies” and “misrepresentation” (“Re: DOAC’s inviting”) of a few members of the audience nor by the vitriol exposed in various online venues that have seen quite a bit of traffic since the session. I therefore take this opportunity briefly to set the record straight by countering two of the outlandish claims made by the RC members in the leaflet they distributed and which has since the convention been published online. It is hoped that we might thereby redirect attention from the misleading spin about the session to the all-important questions still very much at hand with which we as an association would be well advised to continue to tackle in this early century. Does the “1940 AAUP Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom” still apply to English and other language teachers in the 21st century? Have we MLA members learned anything new in implementing and adapting it some forty years after the 1970 interpretive comments thereon?

The allegation that the panel was “stacked” in favor of right-wing views is outrageous. As 2008 MLA President Gerald Graff had suggested it might, invited roundtable participants included “one or more people [who would] challenge the likely consensus view.” It was important to shake things up. As Mark Bauerlein notes, “Any group pledged to uphold or to dismantle certain values and norms should never grow too comfortable with its agenda, or too closed in its deliberations.” Bucking “insularity” (*Dumbest* 221), I therefore followed Graff’s suggestion to enlist one or two panelists “who figure to challenge [the premise that humanist academics are the victims of a right-wing attempt to suppress their academic freedom] and offer an alternative view.” Why not have invited Horowitz, who on 24 March 2008 accepted the invitation, to face and respond to his critics? Realizing that his views would likely not be popular with many members in attendance and that his “demonization” as “McCarthyite, witch-hunter, organizer of right-wing plots, destroyer of universities” was already “well advanced in the modern language professions,” he nonetheless expressed his fear that the session might easily become “a lynching party with [his] truly as the guest of honor.” How, he wondered, did I propose to make the event “anything but unpleasant (and unproductive)” for him? In my response to him that same day, I tried to be reassuring; I furthermore assured him that I would strive for balance in the panel’s composition and that I sincerely hoped that the session would be productive for everybody involved: “I would like to see a balanced panel representing as many views on the thorny (?) issue [of academic freedom] as possible so as to be useful and interesting to MLA members in attendance.” With this very balance in mind, I had already sent a message to the Delegate Assembly listserv in which I had solicited suggestions for panelists: “The Delegate Assembly Organizing Committee would like to have a roundtable discussion on academic freedom at the 2008 MLA convention in San Francisco. Your help in suggesting potential participants would be appreciated. Thanks in advance!” Not surprisingly, and given the perceived erosion by many MLA members of academic freedom in the academy, I received myriad nominations. After careful consideration, I extended invitations to Barbara Foley and Paula Krebs—both of whom declined them due to other commitments they already had. I also invited Donald Pease, who at first agreed to speak but later backed out when he was reminded of the two-panel limit imposed on all MLA members scheduled to speak at the annual convention.

In retrospect, my only regret is that I was not able to achieve a better gender balance and that there were no representatives from the MLA’s so-called “activist bottom” (Sullivan 255). But as I explained to panelist Norma Cantú on 28 March, all non-tenure track faculty members and members of any other constituencies who might have wanted their voices better heard were

urged to attend the discussion: “As moderator, I will do my best to leave adequate time for questions and input from any and all.”

If a red carpet was rolled out for Horowitz by our association, I certainly never saw it. In accordance with MLA guidelines, I took it upon myself to request the following for him: a waiver of his membership, registration exemption, the \$100 minimum funding offered by the association, and convention hotel housing for one night. In my dealings with Horowitz, the only special treatment he requested was to be allowed to speak last, to “go cleanup” (“Re: Your question”). But I had vowed to treat all panelists as equals and not to curry favor with any of them. The program had also already been published by then. I therefore stuck to my guns: Horowitz and all other panelists would have to follow the alphabetical order in which each panelist had been listed in the program.

At the beginning of the session, panelists were reminded and audience members informed of its protocol: there would be neither video- nor audio-taping; each panelist would have twelve minutes to speak; after each panelist had spoken, there would be two minutes per panelist for follow-up comments; members of the audience would have thirty seconds per question, and panelists would get up to one minute to respond. All of these time restrictions were implemented to maintain balance and to ensure as much participation and exchange as possible within the constraints of a 75-minute session. Despite them, I am pleased by the vigorous give and take that occurred. Although “tightly formatted” (McMillen), the session was stimulating and largely positive. It speaks well of our association’s commitment to promoting “conditions of free inquiry” and to furthering “public understanding” of academic freedom that the MLA is the first major scholarly association at which Horowitz has spoken and been given the opportunity to engage with his critics and supporters—most of whom were respectful of his right, and that of the other panelists, to speak freely. It is also reassuringly indicative of the MLA’s continued “health and integrity” (“1940 Statement” 6).

One member of the audience reminded Horowitz that he had used up his allotted time. While warranted, it nonetheless seemed rude and disrespectful for him to have shouted out the reminder from the back of the room. This was after all hardly in the professional spirit of the session. And the repeatedly-mouthed obscenity from near the back of the room to Horowitz from another RC member after he had responded to her question—visible, I might note, from the front of the room to me and other panelists—seemed, to use the accusatory adjectives of the very leaflets she had helped distribute, “troublesome” and “repugnant” (“Re: DAOC’s inviting”). Talk about the pot calling the kettle black! As I state in a comment on the December 2008 article covering the session that was published in *Inside Higher Education*, “I would have expected more of a colleague—especially of one suggesting that the DAOC ‘apologize [...] for degrading the level of scholarship and debate that MLA members legitimately expect from any session they attend at the convention’ ” (“Practice”). As scholars we should remember that the public may judge our profession by our utterances, that we should exercise “appropriate restraint,” and that we should be respectful of the opinions of others (“1940 Statement” 3-4). Although arguably protected forms of expression, both protests strike me as hypocritical, out of place—hardly appropriately restrained or respectful.

I thus respectfully disagree with the RC detractors in attendance but thank them for attending. Let their misguided antics and some of the ill-focused online commentary deriving from these antics not be allowed to upstage nor distort the positive exchange that did occur in San Francisco and for which all members should be heartened. Spin in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*

suggests that we are at an “impasse” (McMillen, “Impasse”). It is incumbent upon us to try to move beyond it.

Let us leave the academic culture wars to historians of the 20th century. Horowitz had the courage to walk into our “Lions’ Den” (Ward). We should be bold enough and have the foresight to move on, move beyond the infighting that makes lousy press and gets us nowhere. Let us tackle together the many pressing professional issues facing us in the long century ahead. Do we not owe it to ourselves, our colleagues and students—present and future? Our and their careers will surely depend on it.

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